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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the application of Rudolf Laban's theories of movement to the teaching of choreography and improvisation. The paper presents learning activities appropriate for early encounters in the development of artistic process skills. It is predicated on the theory that the choreographic process is a heuristic process of "working" the dance medium with a view to recreating qualities in a concrete form. Utilizing Laban's theories, the paper explores practical means of teaching such artistic process skills as multiplicity of thinking in the medium and the perception and transformation of aesthetic qualities. (Author)

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THE LABANANALYSIS POTENTIAL: CREATIVE WORK

PRESENTED AT THE AMERICAN ALLIANCE FOR HEALTH,
PHYSICAL EDUCATION, RECREATION & DANCE CONVENTION
FRIDAY, APRIL 19, 1985

PENELOPE HANSTEIN, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF DANCE
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

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The intent of this paper is to explore the application of Laban's theories to creative work. In particular it will focus on the teaching of choreography and improvisation, emphasizing experiences appropriate for early encounters in the development of artistic process skills. In as much as this is a personal account of my work it is necessary, at the outset, to provide a very brief discussion of how I view the artistic process in dance. It is this perspective that defines the framework within which I use the Laban movement theories; both as a choreographer and as a teacher of choreography.

Unfortunately for the student, there are no recipes for becoming a good choreographer, for each choreographer approaches uniqueness in his artistic process. Although there is no one way to make a dance it is possible to make certain generalizations concerning the skills a choreographer or any artist, for that matter, possesses.

The artistic process in dance can be broadly described as involving, among other things, the perception and recreation of qualities in a concrete form. This form may take any shape from a concert dance work to an in-progress compositional study. Creative work is a heuristic process-- a process of thinking and

rethinking, learning through investigation and exploration, and is, in short, primarily experimental (Eisner, 1982). While there are many other skills involved in the creation of dance works the discussion here will be confined to the actual process of manipulating, "working", or "playing with" the dance medium--movement.

The choreographic process is a process of "working" the dance medium, recreating ideas in movement, and is, according to art educator David Ecker (1963), a thinking through of ideas in the particular qualities of the medium. This process, in dance, is one of shaping, molding, selecting, rejecting, elaborating--an ordering of the choreographer's means (movement) towards what Ecker calls a qualitative end-in-view. This is not a linear or prescribed progression of steps but rather more like a negotiated or conversational process between the choreographer and his medium.

For the choreographer, the process of transforming one's ideas requires a thorough working knowledge of the dance medium. The actual knowledge and understanding of how the dance medium functions as an expressive symbol system differs from one individual to another and is influenced, among other things, by personal movement preferences and stylistic tendencies. It is here that the Laban work, which represents the most thorough taxonomy of human movement, is an invaluable tool for both the choreographer and the teacher of choreography. However, it should be emphasized, that it is not an end in and of itself, but

rather a basis for rich and multifaceted movement explorations. It is a way of coming to grips with the very subjective nature of movement and yet, allowing the freedom for each individual to develop their own mode of personal expression.

In the teaching process, it is possible to facilitate improvisations designed to explore in turn the various components of the Laban taxonomy, such as bodily actions, Effort, space, and relationships. However, my approach is to use the Laban theories of movement as a way of linking and integrating several ideas while focusing on the qualitative aspects of a particular component of the dance medium.

For Example, I like to begin my improvisation class with an exploration of weight, and in particular, the center of weight. This reflects my belief that movement initiates from the center and that dance is above all else about moving. Presented here is one example of a series of improvisations that encompassed ten classes. The major objective was to explore the use of the body weight as an initiator of movement. This qualitative investigation of weight served as the framework for exploring several other aspects of the medium through a process of layering. I employ a method designed to encourage divergent explorations of the various ideas rather than replication. It involves three teaching modes:

DOING: This involves the actual making, experiencing, experimenting, and discovering encounters and are primarily improvisational.

DIALOGUING: Intended to be just that--a dialogue. Reciprocal encounters among the students and between the teacher and the students. Its purpose is to exercise perceptual and interpretive skills as well as those skills associated with discerning, discriminating, and evaluating qualitative patterns in movement. Dialoguing is also a means for assessing internal and external coherence and congruency between intentions, kinesthetic sensations, and the visual images created.

DESIGNING: The actual making of a dance form emphasizing the transformation of ideas into a shared "form of representation" (Elliot Eisner's term).

We begin with the physical sensation of weight, how the body and its parts react to gravity. Using partners we are able to explore the quality of dead weight and mobilizing the body weight. This also provides the initial opportunity to encounter relationships and group interactions. Using the body weight to initiate both an "on-goingness" and "impulse and resultant action" energy phrasing we explore propelling the body thru space. This incorporates several different aspects of the medium, for instance, basic body actions, and the qualitative difference between initiating movement with the center of levity vs. the center of strength. This seemed to lead directly into an exploration of weightiness; resilient or rebounding movement. Once again, using an aspect of weight to set the body in motion,

we use the rebounding to initiate shaping or forming the body in space. This approach emphasizes the creating of goal-oriented and three-dimensional shapes within the flow or continuity of movement.

Everything we have explored up to this point has emphasized the continuous flow of movement. Even with varying degrees of energy exertion, it becomes apparent to the students that the pervading visual impression is equivalent to that of a run-on sentence. In contrast to this we explore the relationship of motion and stillness; the importance of energized pauses and the difference between stopping and arresting the motion.

Introducing the concept of using everyday actions as a movement source we incorporate playing with motion/destination and intermittent and continuous flow of energy. As the basis for this improvisation I used such basic actions as: squat, stand, hang, sit, reach, look, run-jump/turn, jump. The students progressed through a changing sequence of movement several times; first, moving from position to position, then emphasizing the connections rather than the positions, and finally passing through both positions and connections, resulting in a continuous phrase of movement. The positions are now movements and the connections only transitions.

The feeling of motion and the visualizing of motion, from the choreographer's perspective, are two different experiences; one contributing to the understanding of the other. I have found that activities involving the actual drawing, on paper, of the

movement and quality of a dancer in motion, as well as the body, figuratively, "drawing" in space to be a very productive means of addressing both the kinesthetic and visual experiences of perceiving movement. This also provides an excellent framework for introducing the effort weight continuum as well as body parts leading and guiding.

Within this scheme I also included explorations which involved limiting the students' movements to floorwork, something beginning students do not seem inclined to do on their own. We begin with weightiness; using rebound and follow-through as the impetus for shaping and designing movement on the floor; coming up only to go down again. This incorporates explorations of level and direction changes, contraction/extension, and continues to emphasize the layering of the many aspects of the dance medium already encountered.

Throughout this process it is important to highlight, through dialoguing, both the qualitative sense of moving and the qualitative experience of watching others move. Through this process it becomes apparent to the students that different ways of moving create different visual impressions and that clear intentions and articulate performance, on the part of the mover, are essential for any perceptible statement to emerge.

Understanding the dynamic structure of movement is vital for the choreographer and is a knowledge, both conceptually and practically, that does not come easily to the student. The work of Laban, and those who have applied his seminal ideas to diverse

fields of study provide a framework for understanding movement beyond its quantitative or structural components. The expenditure of energy in movement as well as the unique way energy is organized into phrases create a qualitative dimension of movement. It is the combination of both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects that gives movement its expressive content and has the potential to create a compelling theatre experience.

The perception of qualities and the recreation of these qualities in movement involves a process of transforming one's ideas by allowing the idea to guide the creation of movement and not the production of choreographic phrases through the replication of known movements. This is where I find the entire collective of movement analysis systems: Effort , Space Harmony, and Labanotation to be invaluable. To be more specific, the following is a description of one sort of encounter which is specifically oriented toward developing perceptual skills and the transformation of perceived qualities into the dance medium.

We begin with some idea, any idea, and work toward describing the qualitative experience one has when responding to the particular idea, object, or event. This description is entirely at an experiential level unrelated to movement. We then set about describing how this qualitative experience might be visualized in movement. I have found it very helpful to have the students close their eyes and describe the dancer, in their mind's eye, moving. We utilize the qualitative movement language

acquired during improvisations, as well as evocative language, to describe the movement. It is important to emphasize that this does not involve the naming of steps but rather defining the qualitative sense of the movement. This description then serves as the motivation for their individual improvisations and, eventually, the creation of a motif that is embodied or imbued with some aspect of the original qualitative experience.

The students' gradually developing knowledge of the dance medium, and its qualitative dimensions, guides them in their process of creating dance forms that are more than mere representational images or replication of technique steps. Laban movement analysis provides, on a very practical level, the link between structure and intensity, form and color, and denotative and connotative meaning.

Finally, the Laban movement theories when used in a divergent way promote multiplicity of thinking--the ability to entertain ideas from many vantage points. It can encourage exploration, experimentation, and the development of many creative points of view with regard to using the dance medium. "Playing with" the transposition of body actions, variations of effort elements and effort phrasings, as well as exploring the many spatial themes promotes a kind of multifaceted thinking in the movement medium.

In sum, the artistic process in dance is characterized by the perception of diverse qualities and the recreation of these qualities in a dance form. This requires a thorough knowledge of

the dance medium and the ability to engage in multifaceted thinking in the dance medium. Labananalysis as a multidimensional taxonomy of human movement addressing both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects has unlimited potential to function as a highly creative tool for the teaching of artistic process skills.

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